

# The Island of the Dead

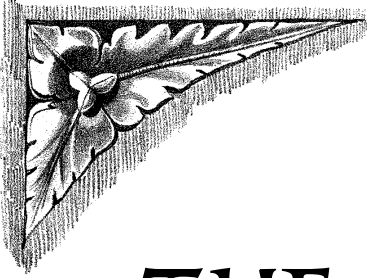


**TWO POEMS ON HART ISLAND**

**by**

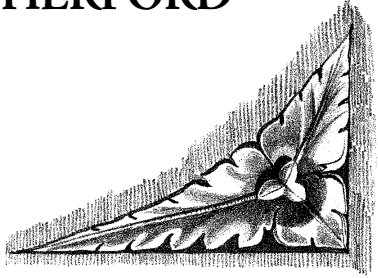
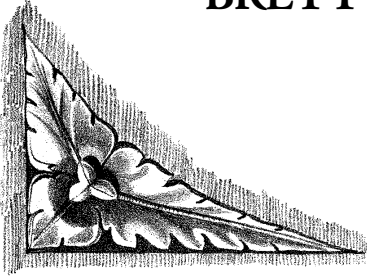
**BRETT RUTHERFORD**





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TWO POEMS BY  
BRETT RUTHERFORD



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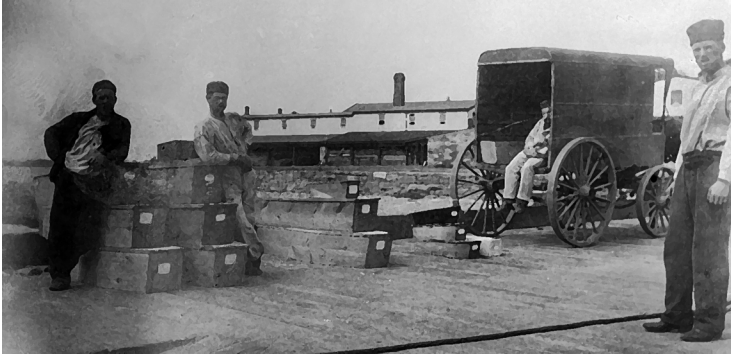


THE ISLAND  
OF THE DEAD

TWO POEMS  
ON HART ISLAND

*From Those Waiting  
To Be Named.*





1

## HART ISLAND

---

Ferry cuts fog  
in Long Island Sound,  
baleful horn bellowing;

a midnight run  
unblessed by harbor lights,  
unknown to sleeping millions;

convicts at the rails,  
guards behind them,  
dour-faced captain at the helm  
a face and a pipe  
and a dead-ahead glare,  
an empty gaze that asks no questions,  
offers no advice

A careful mooring,  
cables thicker than hanging noose  
bind ship to pier;  
pilings like pagan columns  
bind pier to Hart Island.

Convicts shuffle to the end of the dock,  
guards behind them with billy clubs,  
hands tensed at holster.

*You fellas better behave now,*  
the captain mutters,  
*just do what you're told.*  
*And no funny business,* another voice warns,  
*'cause anything could happen to you here.*

The prisoners shiver at moonless expanse  
of blackened water,  
dead shell of Bronx one way,  
bedrooms of Queens the other;  
clap their hands,  
blow on their fingers  
to fight the chill.

*Guess you would freeze,* one speculates,  
*before you could swim to shore.*

*Just do what you're told,*  
the biggest con admonishes.  
*I been here before. Do what*  
*you're told and then it's over.*

Eager to earn  
the early release,  
willing to dig  
and lift and carry,  
they turn to the foreman.  
He points to the tarp  
that covers the cargo.

They lift the tiny oblong boxes,  
frail as balsa,  
thin pine confining  
the swaddled contents.

*What's in these things?*  
one asks, taking on three  
stacked to his chin.

*Over there*, is all the foreman says,  
pointing to mounds  
where a silent back hoe  
stands sentinel.

*These be coffins*, the older con explains.  
*Baby coffins.*

They lower the boxes  
into the waiting holes,  
read the tags attached to them:

BABY BOY FRANKLIN

CARL HERNANDEZ

UNKNOWN BABY GIRL, HISPANIC.

The adult coffins are heavier,  
two men at least to carry each one.  
They can joke about these:  
    *Heavy bastard, this Jose.*  
        *Carla here, she musta wasted away.*  
But no one speaks about the babies.  
The convicts' eyes grow angry, then sad.  
  
Later the mounds will be toppled,  
the soil returned to the holes,  
flattened and tamped  
with a cursory blessing  
by an ecumenical chaplain.  
  
These are the lonely dead,  
the snuff-out of innocence:  
  
crack babies  
AIDS babies  
    babies dead from drive-by bullets  
babies abandoned like unwanted kittens  
    dumpster children  
  
No wonder this island cries in its sleep.



2

## THEY CLOSED HIS EYES

---

*after Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer*

I went to visit a dying friend,  
for one last time. His eyes  
were open. I took his bony hand  
and pressed it. His fingers clutched  
at life, and he gasped a name  
(not mine) and said, "I always  
loved you best of all." I lied,  
and said I loved him equally.

No mother, brother, lover, son,  
no sister, cousin or father  
came to stand by as the tubes  
were removed, the machine  
silenced and wheeled away.

They closed his eyes  
that were open still  
and wanted to be open  
still for the coming sunrise  
mirror red on the East River.  
They hid his face  
with a white linen.

And out of nowhere  
anonymous mourners came,  
some sobbing, some silent.  
They come each day, I am told,  
and they come for everyone  
who has no one. They stood  
as the bed frame was dropped  
and the wheeled death-cart  
was moved to its side.  
From the sad sickroom,  
they moved away like shadows  
and vanished in the corridor.

In a dish, the night candle  
burned on a low table.  
It cast on the wall  
the deathbed's outline,  
and in that shadow  
the sharp lines  
of his wasted body.

The dawn appeared  
pearl white and then ruby red.  
With a thousand noises  
the city exploded to life:  
horns, sirens, jackhammers  
and the mournful hum  
of traffic far below.

As ordinary light  
cascaded into the death-room,  
I thought for a moment:

*How much more lonely than we  
are the newly-dead!*

On the shoulders of men  
who did not know his name,  
gloved and face-masked  
against the feared contagion  
they bore him away

and in a chapel left  
the freshly-wrapped body  
on a plywood bier.  
A number was stenciled there.

Then others surrounded  
his pale body  
with yellow candles  
and things of black crèpe  
disposable grief that had  
no shape but the wing-edge  
of a dusty raven, no use  
except to fill the space  
between the corpse  
and the imaginary public.

.No one came. Well, almost  
no one: a bag lady crone  
put down her burden and knelt,  
mumbled some prayers  
and shuffled off. She crossed  
the narrow nave. Door moaned,  
opened without a hand  
upon it to let her out.



The holy place was quiet,  
a cell of silence as a barrage  
of taxi hails and basketball  
court echoes filtered in  
through a broken window.

One pigeon fluttered in,  
cooed disapproving  
that it was not a rice-wedding  
then flapped away.

I was directed there.  
Some hours had passed.  
I stood alone, or nearly so.  
A young priest approached,  
saw who and what was there  
to be blessed and buried,  
covered his face,  
and hurried away.

My ears reached out  
until I could hear  
the chapel's one clock  
in measured ticking.

A bank of candles  
to one side of the nave  
took to guttering  
at the same beat  
as my own breathing.

All things here  
were so dark and mournful,  
rigid and cold,  
not even a tear was welcome,  
and I thought for a moment:

*How much more lonely than we  
are the newly-dead!*

Should there not be  
a legion of mourners?  
Should he not be  
where all who knew him  
could gather and mourn?

I imagine the high belfry  
of his New England town,  
the iron tongue clanging  
of the funeral bells,  
mournful in last farewell.

Veils and black suits,  
eyes cast down in grief,  
his friends and relatives  
passed in a line and shook  
each other's hands, and hugged.

And in that high place  
in the old family's last vault,  
dark and narrow,  
crowded with his ancestors,  
the crowbar opened  
a niche at one end,  
and they laid him away there,  
then sealed it up  
amid a hecatomb of camellias.

Newspapers would show  
the memorial plaque;  
friends would come annually.

But this was not to be.  
New England paid no dues  
to a death in New York,  
a death of *that* kind among  
*those* kinds of people.

The body, on its plywood  
plinth, would go instead  
into a plywood casket,  
then onto a barge,  
with hundreds of like kind,  
piled high and hauled across  
to the Potter's Field  
on desolate Hart Island.

Pick-axe on shoulder,  
the convict gravedigger,  
cursing his lot in dawn-fog,  
stood on a mound. His box,  
among many other  
numbered boxes, dropped  
into a numbered plot.  
Not a word was said,  
not even a prayer.

It was silent. Only now,  
after years of dream-dread  
can I see it: headlong,  
crooked, piled one  
upon another at crazy angles,  
a quilt of coffins, at last  
death's final suffocation  
into a nameless grave.  
And I sit up in my bed  
and think:

*How much more lonely than we  
are the unmarked dead!*

On winter nights  
in bitter darkness,  
when wind makes  
the rafters chatter,  
when whipped rain  
lashes the window panes,  
in such a lonely time  
I remember my poor friend,  
and the nameless dead  
heaped up with him:  
how many had I touched?  
how many had touched me?

There on Hart Island,  
in the pit full of brother-souls,  
do they hear the rain  
with its same yet ever-  
changing monody?  
Do they hear the winds'  
stern fights across the bay,  
the tug boats, the fog-horns,  
the sway-song of tides buoyed  
by the revolving moon?  
Do their bones freeze  
with the cold of winter?

Does dust to dust return?  
Do souls abandoned by earth  
have any place in any heaven?  
Or is it all the rot of matter,  
organic filthiness and worms?

I do not know. I tramp most  
graveyards merrily. I am not  
a morose or gloomy soul, and yet,  
something there is — something  
that treads behind my nights  
with loathing and terror.

City of a billion lights, city  
of symphonies and towers  
aspiring to Promethean heights:  
how did a hundred thousand souls  
perish in your averted gaze?  
A hundred thousand brother-dead  
I cannot begin to mourn and cannot  
even count.

How much more lonely than we  
are the hundred thousand dead  
who have gone on without us?

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870), a Spanish poet from Seville, influenced by E.T.A Hoffmann and Heinrich Heine, wrote an elegiac poem titled "They Closed Her Eyes." I have gender-changed, "written over," and expanded upon his poem for this work, which is in memory of the 100,000 fatalities from HIV in New York during the 1980s, specifically those who wound up in the Potter's Field because no family would claim their bodies.

## ABOUT THE POET

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Brett Rutherford, born in Scottdale, Pennsylvania, began writing poetry seriously during a stay in San Francisco. During his college years at Edinboro State College in Pennsylvania, he published an underground newspaper and printed his first hand-made poetry chapbook. He moved to New York City, where he founded The Poet's Press in 1971. For more than twenty years, he worked as an editor, journalist, printer, and consultant to publishers and nonprofit organizations.

After a literary pilgrimage to Providence, Rhode Island, on the track of H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe, he moved there with his press. *Poems From Providence* was the fruit of his first three years in the city (1985-1988), published in 1991. Since then, he has written a study of Edgar Allan Poe and Providence poet Sarah Helen Whitman (briefly Poe's fiancée), a biographical play about Lovecraft, and his second novel, *The Lost Children* (Zebra Books, 1988). His poetry, in volumes both thematic and chronological, can be found in *Poems From Providence* (1991, 2011), *Things Seen in Graveyards* (2007), *Twilight of the Dictators* (1992, 2009), *The Gods As They Are, On their Planets* (2005, 2012), *Whippoorwill Road: The Supernatural Poems* (1998, 2005, 2012), and *An Expectation of Presences* (2012).

Returning to school for a master's degree in English, Rutherford completed this project in 2007, and worked for University of Rhode Island in distance learning, and taught for the Gender and Women's Studies Department. There, he created courses on "The Diva," "Women in Science Fiction," and "Radical American Women."

He has prepared annotated editions of Matthew Gregory Lewis's *Tales of Wonder*, the poetry of Charles Hamilton Sorley, A.T. Fitzroy's antiwar novel *Despised and Rejected*, and the collected writings of Emilie Glen and Barbara A. Holland.



His interests include classical music and opera, and Latin American music; Chinese art, history and literature; bicycling, graveyards, woods, horror films, intellectual history, and crimes against nature.

Retiring from his workaday life in early 2016, Rutherford moved to the Squirrel Hill neighborhood in Pittsburgh where he continues to write, study music, and run The Poet's Press.

# ART CREDITS

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Cover: Ruined chapel at Hart Island. Duotone digital art.

Inside illustrations: Digital art based on photographs by Jacob Riis of work details at Hart Island, c. 1890. Originals at Museum of the City of New York.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

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“Hart Island” was written in the 1980s, after I read a newspaper article about the burials of HIV/AIDS victims at New York’s potter’s field on Hart Island. It became part of my collection titled *Things Seen in Graveyards*.

“They Closed His Eyes” emerged spontaneously as I was working on a translation of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s much shorter elegy, “They Closed Her Eyes.” The corona virus pandemic was on my mind, and I did not realize that Hart Island would soon be put to use again. Within days of my completing this poem, television news showed work crews digging trenches for the dead at Hart Island. The note at the end of the poem explains the liberties I have taken with Bécquer’s original: it is a transformation and expansion, incorporating all of his lines but into a larger context of mourning and loss.

The body type of this book is set in 14-point Adobe Jensen, an oldstyle serif font designed by Robert Slimbach. The Roman face is based on a font cut by Venetian printer Nicolas Jenson around 1470. Since many oldstyle fonts did not incorporate italics, those for this font are based on a set created around 1520 by Ludovico Vincentino degli Arrighi.

Small titles are set in Morris Golden, a font created by William Morris for the Kelmscott Press in 1890. This modern digital recreation of the type by the P22 Type Foundry simulates the soft-edged impression of hand-set metal type on hand-made paper. Morris in turn based his designs on typefaces created by Nicolas Jenson. Larger titles are set in Solemnis, an uncial-style font designed by Günter Gerhard Lange in 1953. Lange created many classic revival fonts for the Berthold foundry, leading that organization through the eras of metal, photo and then digital type design.

